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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000388

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ENERGY FOR EKIMOFF/THOMPSON
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/28/2028
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN/TURKEY: ENERGY WAS THE KEY ISSUE

Classified By: CDA RICHARD E. HOAGLAND: 1.4 (B), (D)

11. (S) SUMMARY: Turkish Ambassador Hakki Akil told the Charge on March 28,

-- the key issue discussed during President Berdimuhamedov's March 24-25 visit to Turkey was energy, both with President Gul and Prime Minister Erdogan;

-- Berdimuhamedov is prepared to sell to Turkey up to 20 bcm/y of natural gas and wants to do so via the Caspian;

-- Turkey is playing a helpful role between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan but is fully aware of Turkmenistan's sensitivities;

-- Foreign Minister Meredov is probably more powerful than ever, but increasingly has to keep his head down in deference to a more secure Berdimuhamedov, doesn't delegate, and is increasingly overwhelmed; and

-- a Berdimuhamedov visit to Washington within the next four months would be received as a mark of respect and would "open many doors for what we all want to accomplish -- and not just in energy." END SUMMARY.

ENERGY WAS THE VISIT'S KEY ISSUE

12. (S) Turkish Ambassador Hakki Akil told Charge March 28 energy was the key issue discussed in Ankara March 24 during President Berdimuhamedov's two-day official visit to Turkey, the first by a Turkmen president in nearly eight years. March 25 was a "cultural day" in Istanbul. Akil said he was alarmed when a day or two before the Turkmen delegation was

to depart Ashgabat, the presidential protocol office informed the Turkish Embassy Deputy Prime Minister for Oil and Gas Tachberdi Tagiyev would not travel with the president, as previously planned. Akil assumed that meant energy would be totally off the agenda. Instead, on March 24 energy was the key issue Berdimuhamedov discussed with both Prime Minister Erdogan and President Gul. Akil said his side reprimanded him after the Erdogan meeting for having participated in great detail, but, he said, that was the only way to ensure that President Berdimuhamedov heard a detailed discussion of the issue, since Akil is never sure how much actually gets passed to him by his own ministers.

TURKMENISTAN SAYS READY TO SELL TURKEY UP TO 20 BCM/Y NATURAL GAS

13. (S) Berdimuhamedov's meeting with President Gul was one-on-one, with only the Turkmen Foreign Ministry Director for the Middle East and Turkey serving as translator. Berdimuhamedov reportedly assured Gul Turkmenistan is prepared to sell to Turkey 10 bcm/y of natural gas to begin with and eventually up to 20 bcm/y, and would strongly prefer to do this via the Caspian -- off-shore Turkmenistan to off-shore Azerbaijan. Gul suggested an alternate route might be via Iran, but Berdimuhamedov responded firmly that should be only a fall-back option because he doesn't trust Iran to be a reliable partner. He allegedly quipped Turkmenistan-Iran is like Russia-Ukraine. When Gul pressed on the technical aspects, Berdimuhamedov assured him it would be relatively easy to link Turkmenistan's and Azerbaijan's off-shore infrastructures.

14. (S) During the meeting with the Prime Minister that Akil

ASHGABAT 00000388 002 OF 003

attended, Erdogan promoted the Nabucco Pipeline and made clear Turkmenistan's gas is needed for it. Berdimuhamedov asked, "Who actively supports Nabucco?" Erdogan reportedly replied, "Obviously, the European Union." Berdimuhamedov asked, "Anyone else?" Erdogan added, "The United States, of course." According to Akil, Berdimuhamedov beamed and said, "That's what I wanted to hear. That's what I wanted to hear!"

TURKEY MEDIATES BETWEEN TURKMENISTAN AND AZERBAIJAN?

15. (S) When Charge asked if Turkey is mediating between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, Akil was a bit guarded. He said the Turkish side had originally hoped for a four-day, not two-day visit, and that the final two days would have been at a private site on Turkey's southern coast -- with Azerbaijan's President Aliyev present. But the Turkmen had scotched that. In the end, the Turkish side raised but did not press the idea of a tripartite summit. Berdimuhamedov didn't say no, but he made clear he wants an Aliyev visit to Ashgabat first. Despite recent press reports, Akil said he does not believe there is any agreement for that yet, "although you never know what the secretive Turkmen are up to until they do it." He suggested it might be useful for the United States to suggest to Aliyev, who is "more reasonable," that he make the first move and ask to visit Ashgabat soonest. Akil re-emphasized what we have often heard: "Never underestimate Turkmenistan's historic inferiority complex about Azerbaijan." Akil hinted an "accidental" Turkey-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan meeting could happen in Bucharest at the April 2-4 NATO Summit. At the end of their meeting, Akil told the Charge, "There might be a surprise within a month. Don't be shocked if there's a tri-partite ministerial" (Turkey, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan).

A FULLY SUCCESSFUL VISIT

16. (S) Akil said he is aware the media were misled about the discussion of energy during the visit, and so the think-tank analysts are getting it wrong, too. But that was done purposely at the Turkmen side's insistence to ensure there is no publicity about Berdimuhamedov's Caspian intentions -- yet.

¶17. (C) The other parts of the visit were generally prosaic with no serious missteps, although Akil said the Turks were more than a little bemused by the cultural pomp and emphasis on Turkmen culture and Turkmen-centered events Ashgabat demanded, including a meeting with 800 Turkmen students and military cadets studying in Turkey and a concert that included 20 Turkmen dancers, who also performed for the president at various stops.

¶18. (C) Akil said Ankara judges the visit was fully successful. He also believes Berdimuhamedov was highly satisfied -- so much so that he offered Akil an Ahaltekke horse as a thank-you gift for his role.

FOREIGN MINISTER MEREDOV

¶19. (C) Akil asserted that Foreign Minister Meredov is "Berdimuhamedov's brain," primarily responsible for Turkmenistan's new policies. He added that the problem is Turkmen leaders, traditionally and today, do not like to share power or be seen as sharing power. That means Meredov has to walk a tightrope at all times to keep his head down. As Berdimuhamedov feels more secure as president, Meredov has to limit his time with foreign ambassadors -- even though he is foreign minister -- because he can't afford to be seen as

ASHGABAT 00000388 003 OF 003

possibly plotting. A further complication, according to Akil, is that Meredov is a fierce micromanager and gives as little authority as possible to his deputies and department heads, and so anything, unless it's truly front-burner, that used to take forever to get done now takes twice as long as forever.

INVITE BERDIMUHAMEDOV TO WASHINGTON

¶10. (S) Akil urged that the United States invite Berdimuhamedov to Washington within the next four months. He said the Turkmen president would value that as a mark of respect, and the visit would "open many doors for what we all want to accomplish -- and not just in energy." Geopolitically, Berdimuhamedov needs the visit to buck him up against Russia, which "has him under enormous pressure," Akil emphasized. Charge said he would convey Akil's views to Washington.
HOAGLAND